

A Brief History of Falling for Billy Hargrove by lenaismad

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In which Steve realises that falling for Billy isn't at all as hard as one might think.

A Brief History of Falling for Billy Hargrove

Author's Note:

This started off as a fairly short one shot. I was sitting at a café with this friend of mine who was talking about wanting to write an 'It' fanfic and I got this idea of writing something myself stuck in my head. At that time I had just recently started season two of my beloved Stranger Things and, few days later, when I finished the last episode I sat on my bed, at 2am on a school night, in the dark of my bedroom, thinking that Billy and Steve would make hell of a good couple. And after that I thought about it more and more and more, and then one day I opened my laptop and vomited out 4000 words and thought yeah, I'll finish it tomorrow, 5000 words is quite enough. Well, the next day I added another 2000. And I kept writing and writing and writing. Now it has more than 11K words and it's probably the longest thing I have ever written. Enjoy.

The first time Billy and Steve fought without any real heat in their blows was the day Coach rounded the whole team up and looked every single one of them in the eye.

"I couldn't help but notice some unnecessary tension between a few of you, lads," he said, throwing a particularly sharp look at Billy, who smiled almost sheepishly, and Steve, whose face still had a slight yellowish tinge from the fading bruises, a courtesy of Billy's fists, "and you know that I don't mind a little bit of healthy rivalry – it keeps you sissies working hard – but when you try to kill each other on the court, it's my responsibility to take action. So," he clapped his hands, the sound echoing in the eery silence that took over the room, "you've ever heard about boxing?"

The team exchanged nervous glances, muttering below their breaths, everyone eyeing the person they'd like to see with a broken nose the most. Steve's ribs still ached from the last time he and Billy got into a brawl but his eyes found their way to the boy who, unsurprisingly,

was already watching him like a hawk observing its prey anyway.

Steve was not sacred. He'd beat Billy up if he had to. This time he would, whatever it took. But that was the thing about fighting with Billy – the boy had fists of stone, no remorse and so much piled up anger fueling him that he was virtually unstoppable once you really got him going.

Neither of the boys was surprised when Coach yelled from the makeshift fighting ring that consisted of a few mats pushed together to create a square area that would, hopefully, prevent their jaws from dislocating if they somehow happened to find themselves on the floor, "Harrington, Hargrove, you two need to let out some steam. Get your sorry asses over here." He handed each of the boys a pair of boxing gloves and patted them on the back, "Fair play, do you hear me? You know the rules – no hitting below the belt, no biting, elbowing and no punches will be thrown when the other one is on the ground. Understood?"

Steve nodded, Billy smirked, then the fight began.

Billy was shirtless, beads of sweat glistening on his bare chest, his blond curls plastered to the back of his neck. "Nervous, Harrington?" he asked. His eyes were dancing with excitement. Steve ignored the taunting but never took his eyes off of Billy's face.

They continued circling each other, slowly, deliberately. And then Billy swung and Steve dodged. An adrenaline surge coursed through his veins and, fuck, did it feel good. He grinned at Billy, raising his eyebrows in the universal sign for "I thought you could do better."

Billy laughed, actually laughed, and threw a second punch. Steve could have dodged it again but, for some reason, he didn't. Billy's fist came down hard, hitting his right side, but Steve was ready for the pain, and before Billy could even do as much as retract his arm, Steve's own glove had already found its mark. And it felt so fucking exhilarating.

Both boys were grinning now, a certain kind of madness reflected in their eyes, as they punched and took the blows and punched again. Because they were angry, fuck they were furious, they wanted the

whole goddamn world to burn, but they weren't angry at each other (not this time, at least). And with every punch a little bit of that anger was let out, out, out, until they were giddy on pain.

In the end, Billy won. He stood over Steve with his teeth showing in a wolfish grin as Coach held up his arm, declaring him the victor. But Steve wasn't mad, not one bit, because he hadn't felt this good in a long, long time.

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The first time Billy waited for Steve at his locker was the day after the boxing match. Steve looked at the boy leaning against the cold metal with his hairsprayed hair and his half unbuttoned shirt that left his entire chest on display and his lips that were in a dire need of a cigarette (at least in Steve's eyes they were, because when Steve imagined Billy he always imagined him with a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth).

"What did I do to be honored with your delightful presence?" Steve asked as he pulled his locker open. He could almost feel Billy's breath on his neck. The close proximity of the other boy was making him uncomfortable. Or maybe it wasn't. He was undecided.

"I was thinking," said Billy, who apparently decided to dismiss Steve's taunting remark, as he watched Steve stuff books into his already full locker.

"Wow, didn't know you were capable of doing that," snapped Steve because it was of a reflex he had developed when he was around Billy, and he may have punched the anger out of himself yesterday but then he came home and his parents didn't care enough to call and he was left alone with his thoughts again and overthinking made him angry.

"Shut up Harrington, I'm trying to make a proposition here," Billy barked back but there wasn't much heat in his voice. In fact, he didn't seem to be bothered by Steve at all.

Steve narrowed his eyes, "What kind of proposition?"

Billy's mouth stretched into a sly sideways smile, "I like the whole fighting-as-a-stress-reliever thing and I like fighting with you," (he liked it because Steve actually put up a fight – he had a kind of vigor not many people who Billy found himself in a brawl with seemed to have, not that he'd ever tell him), "and so I thought we could make it a thing. You in?"

Steve stood there contemplating Billy for a long time. He wanted to do this. He really, really did. When he fought with Billy he felt light and free and fucking careless. And who cares if he couldn't win a single fight? Who cares if he was always the one who ended up on the ground? So he nodded – once for himself, once for Billy.

Billy's smile transformed into a Cheshire-cat grin. He pulled a scrap of paper out of his back pocket and pressed it into Steve's outstretched palm. On it, in black ink and surprisingly neat handwriting, was a phone number and an address.

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The first time Steve and Billy fought just because they wanted to was at an ungodly hour next to the playground. Steve could barely see Billy in the scarce moonlight that seeped through the gathering clouds. Steve's hair wasn't done and he was wearing a pair of old, ill-fitting sweatpants but Billy was clothed in his usual attire of jeans and a barely buttoned shirt. He could even smell a slight waft of cologne. Billy must have told his parents he was going on a date. Steve almost felt flattered – Billy didn't seem like a guy who'd go to that much trouble just to meet up with someone. Then he realized that Billy was not really here for him, was he?

"Gloves?" Steve asked, looking down at his bare hands.

Billy fished out a roll of bandages from his front pocket. He threw them at Steve who pondered the cotton cloth for a moment.

"For your knuckles," Billy clarified, putting his hands into his back pockets.

"Yeah, I know. It's just... I'm just not very good at bandaging things. Even worse when one handed."

Billy didn't say anything. No mocking remarks passed his lips as he stepped closer to Steve, taking the bandages and instructing him to hold out his hands, palms down. He started wrapping Steve's knuckles, layering the cloth until it formed a tight cushion around his hands. Steve observed Billy's face, illuminated only by the moon and the faraway streetlights, and he thought he could see a thin stream of blood dripping from a split in his lip and an outline of a quickly forming bruise on his jaw.

But then Billy moved back into the shadows and his face was once again obscured by darkness. "All done," he said, already working on his own hands, tearing the bandage with his teeth when he was done. He didn't accept any help from Steve, even though he offered. Steve wasn't sure if it was because his pride wouldn't let him or because he didn't want to let Steve near enough to see him clearly again. So Steve kept his distance, wondering who this boy in front of him really was and what happened to him to make him this way. A boy who was a loner by choice, a boy who would rather be mean to everyone than let anyone get to him first, a boy who turned all his emotions into anger because sadness itself was too hard to bear (and Steve knew, because Steve was the same). Or maybe he was just an asshole who didn't give a fuck about anything at all. But in that moment Steve refused to believe he was that shallow – because there had to be a reason, depth, something, to Billy. There just had to.

"Ready?" Billy asked.

"Yeah," Steve breathed out because the force of his voice seemed too loud for the serenity of the night.

And so, without hesitation, Billy swung.

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The first time they actually talked after they were done throwing punches was two weeks after their night meet-ups had become a regular thing. Steve fell onto the grass after a particularly hard punch, laughing. He didn't feel like getting up so he just didn't. At this point Billy would mumble a halfhearted goodbye and leave, only dust from under the Camaro's tires left in his wake. This time, however, he stayed. He sat down next to Steve and pulled out a pack

of Camels. He brought it up to his lips and picked one out with his teeth, then held the pack out to Steve.

Billy lit Steve's cigarette first, sheltering the flame with his palm until the end caught on fire, then proceeded to light his own. They sat in comfortable silence, almost too comfortable for the two of them.

It was strange, Steve thought, how much their attitude toward each other had changed since they started fighting, as if they didn't necessarily need to hate each other. Maybe they never really did. To Steve, it was fascinating to observe how Billy's whole demeanor seemed to transform in the dark, as if a part of his burden fell off and he could breathe properly for a moment.

"You know Harrington, you are not that bad after all," Billy said out of the blue, puffing out rings of cigarette smoke.

Steve hadn't been thinking of Billy as Hargrove for a long time now but he couldn't really call him Billy without it sounding weirdly out of place so, instead, he said, "You are not that bad yourself, Hargrove."

Billy laughed, "I thought you were a spoiled brat, ya know, because you live in a fancy house and all. And for God's sake, they call you King Steve around here. What kind of guy has people call him King? I hated you the moment I heard about you." Steve wanted to defend himself somehow (because maybe he was a popular, horribly conceited idiot once but not anymore, not after all the shit he went through with the kids and Nancy and fuck, he was not that guy anymore) but Billy continued before he could say anything, "Sometimes, when we fight, I feel like you may be just as fucked up as me. You are raw inside, Harrington, you are messed up. I kind of like you for that."

And Billy was fucking right. Steve was fucked up – his parents had never given a fuck, they cared more about their careers than they cared about Steve. And maybe he looked like a spoiled brat from the outside but money wasn't everything and so he made the school love him, appreciate him, adore him. And then he met a girl who cared, who made him feel wanted, and he thought that maybe life wasn't that bad after all, until he realized she was not meant for him or

maybe he was not meant for her and she and Jonathan Byers made such a fucking iconic pair that it made him sick. And then there was Billy who took everything that he had left away from him without really even trying. And Steve hated him for it. He truly hated him until he took a good hard look into those blue eyes full of pain, pain, pain and hurt, hurt, hurt masked by anger and resentment and meanness. And he wondered if Billy had been pushing everything back for so long that he had convinced even himself. Steve liked to think that, when they were alone, Billy let him see glimpses of the person who he could have been, should have been, may still be if one only dug deep enough. And so Steve took a long drag of his cigarette and said, "Funny thing Billy, I kind of like you too."

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The first time Billy really opened up, even if only a tiny bit, was on a late Saturday night when the pavement was still damp from yesterday's rain and the grass was too slick to fight on but Billy still insisted on meeting up. So Steve got up and drove all the way to the address Billy had made him memorize over the phone. It was 3 am and he was seriously doubting their sanity – his own for agreeing to this madness and Billy's for ever making the phone call.

He parked in front of an abandoned-looking factory. He spotted the Camaro and so he got out of his car and made his way toward the shiny vehicle that seemed to strangely fit into the whole scenery. Billy was leaning against the hood, chainsmoking, Steve guessed, considering the small-but-growing pile of buds that was growing at his feet.

"You okay?" Steve asked, quickening his pace at the sight of the seemingly distraught boy.

Billy rose his bowed head, letting the lights hit his face and Steve gasped, forgetting how to talk, how to breathe, how to function for a moment.

Billy's face was fucked up. His jaw was already red and blue and purple even though the bruises didn't seem old at all. His eye was swollen and his lips were split in several places. There was a steady trickle of blood flowing down his temple that continued to drip onto

his shirt even though he tried desperately to wipe it off with his sleeve, hissing in pain every time the cloth came to contact with the wound. His chest was also blooming in the colors of a raging storm. Blue and purple, as if someone kicked him when he was already on the ground.

Billy met Steve's gaze, his eyes wet even though he was too proud to let the tears fall. And so Steve moved without thinking, his strides long and purposeful, until he was standing in front of the withered boy. He pulled Billy into a hug, not a soft and beautiful thing meant to comfort but hard and unshakable, meant to hold up from falling too hard to be picked up again. Billy seemed to be just one shove away from breaking and Steve just wouldn't fucking let that happen.

For a moment they stood there, Steve with his arms around Billy and Billy with his hanging limply by his sides. And Steve almost pulled away. Almost. But then Billy's hands twitched and then his arms were snaking their way around Steve's waist and he was clutching, clutching, clutching for dear life. His wounded face came to rest in the crook of Steve's neck, feeling the racing pulse against his cheek, the sign of being alive. And Steve was alive. He burned with life. And Billy wanted to steal a little bit of it for himself. He didn't care that the tears that were soaking through Steve's shirt made him look weak, he didn't care that this whole situation was so damn out of character for him, because he knew Steve wouldn't tell anyone. Billy allowed the little part of himself he only let out when he was with Steve (the true himself, the one behind the façade of pretend toughness) believe that Steve cared.

And Steve did. As they stood there, clutching at each other (carefully because, fuck, it hurt like a bitch) Steve took a little bit of Billy's burden onto himself. He did it happily and he would do it again because, if it made Billy breathe more easily, he would take the weight of the whole goddamn world onto his shoulders.

That night Billy stayed at Steve's house. He slept on the couch since he wouldn't take the bed, even though Steve offered (again and again and again). He showered for so long his fingers started to wrinkle and Steve didn't say a word about it (unlike his father who would have probably made him pay for the water bill). He watched the brownish water flow down the drain and then he sat on Steve's bed as he fixed

him up to the best of his ability using a better half of the supplies provided by the first aid kit he took from his parents' bathroom (they wouldn't care, in fact they probably wouldn't even notice, and emergency was an emergency).

And then they talked, Steve sitting in the armchair and Billy lying on the couch, pressing a cold beer can to his eye that he, for once, felt no desire to drink. They talked about everything but Billy's wounds, because Billy obviously didn't want to and Steve wouldn't ask.

After Billy fell asleep, Steve stayed and wondered how he would piece back together this boy who was dangerously close to the edge of shattering.

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The first time Steve willingly went to the police station was when he got a call from Chief Hopper.

"Listen son, I know I should be calling Billy's parents but..." he paused as if he was carefully choosing his next words, "Billy's relationship with his father isn't exactly, uh, ideal. I supposed you know what I'm talking about."

Steve's throat went dry and he desperately wanted to punch something (not Billy, not this time). "I have my suspicions."

"I could have called his step mother but I reckon his old man would have found out either way so I'm calling you. I hope you have enough common sense to appreciate this act of kindness."

Steve closed his eyes, seeing the bruises and blood and despair in Billy's eyes in the darkness behind his eyelids. "Yes sir," he mumbled.

"Good. Now get your ass over here." Steve was about to hang up when he heard Chief's voice again, "And Steve, I want you to keep him out of trouble, do you understand? He's not a bad guy. He just doesn't know what it's like to be loved. Find him a nice girl. Fuck, find yourself a nice girl while you are at it. Do whatever you want, just keep him from being arrested again. 'Kay?"

Steve answered with another 'yes, sir' and hung up. The thought of

getting Billy a girl didn't make him happy. He didn't think about it too much.

Twenty minutes later, Billy was sitting in the passenger seat, drumming his fingers against his knee and being so damn infuriatingly silent.

And so Steve burst out. "You beat up a guy!? Fucking hell, Billy! That's what I'm here for! You are supposed to call me when you want a human punching bag! Not pick a fight with a random guy who oh-so-unfortunately rubs you the wrong way and beat him into a barely breathing pulp!"

Billy kept gazing out of the window, expression permanently blank, because Steve was wrong. Steve was fucking wrong. Today he wanted to hurt someone – really, really hurt someone – and he wouldn't hurt Steve (anyone but Steve). But how would he ever explain that to him? So, instead, he asked him if he could spend the night at his place.

"Anytime," Steve said. "Always," he added, face softening, because, no matter how mad he was, he wouldn't say no to Billy.

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The time Steve tried to bring up Billy's father, it didn't go well. The moment the words left his lips, Billy froze. Every muscle in his body went taut, as if he was an animal ready to either flee or attack and, knowing Billy, it was probably the latter.

"Look Billy, I know I'm not the sharpest crayon in the box but I'm not blind. I can't just keep looking at the way he hurts you and stand by doing nothing," Steve said carefully. He could just let it go. He could, but he was not going to.

And then Billy was in his face, so close they shared the same air. "That's exactly what you are going to do, Harrington," Billy snarled.

"Make me, Hargrove" Steve snapped. He knew, somewhere at the back of his head, that if Billy really wanted to, he could make him do anything. He could make his life a living hell. But he wouldn't. And

Billy himself knew that very fucking well, too.

They stood there with barely inches separating them, waging a staring contest both were set on winning. And then Billy's eyes flicked down to Steve's lips and an unwanted but virtually inevitable thought popped up in his head. What would it be like to kiss Steve Harrington? What would King Steve's lips feel like against his? He hadn't thought of Steve as of 'King' in such a long time that the name itself sounded unnatural in his head, unnatural on the tip of his tongue, unnatural as he breathed it out. And fuck did he want to kiss him. A minute ago he hadn't even been considering the possibility (or maybe he had, he only didn't let it settle in his mind) and now it had turned itself into a primal, almost animalistic need. As if Steve's lips were oxygen and he had been stuck underwater all his life. He didn't even care what it made him. He didn't care about consequences (even though that was a lie because there was a whole turmoil of doubt and fear and anguish whirling in mind) as he leaved in and pressed his lips into Steve's.

Steve didn't think, he just acted – moving his lips against Billy's (because in all honesty, the thought of kissing Billy had been on his mind for a long time). Billy's lips were rough and so were his (chapped not forceful, in fact the kiss was somehow gentle) and hot and fucking magnificent and it made him think of hands under shirts and skin against skin but it was way too soon for that.

And so they kissed. And kissed and kissed and kissed. And despite their initial doubts, they never ever came to regret it.

They talked about Billy's father afterwards (because no matter how much Steve would have liked to press his lips onto Billy's and kiss him into oblivion, Billy's wellbeing still came first) and so Billy told Steve about how his mother died when he was little, and how his father found refuge in a bottle and whoring around and eventually beating him, and how he met Susan who was beautiful and soft and so much like his mother, and how his father fell in love with her and how Billy came to hate her so damn much (not necessarily because she did anything wrong, only because she tried to replace his mother and he wouldn't let anyone do that) and when he told his father, he beat him up so hard he had to stay at the hospital for weeks and when he got out his father announced with a way too happy, almost

cruel smile that he and Susan were engaged and that they were moving to Hawkins, Indiana and he couldn't say one goddamn word about it, and then there was Max who wasn't that bad had she not been forced onto him.

"I don't want your pity," Billy said, looking up at Steve from his seat, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth.

Steve smiled, taking the cigarette in between his index and middle finger, "You are not getting any, Hargrove. I'm saving it all up for myself." Billy grinned as Steve pulled out the cigarette, took a drag and leaned down to kiss him.

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The first time Billy really asked Steve out was two months after they kissed (and kept kissing, again and again and again). He had asked him as they were sitting in the backseat of the Camaro which had somehow become their safe haven.

"I was thinking," he said as he pulled for a miniscule moment away from Steve's lips. Steve just hummed, pulling Billy back with a hand on the back of his neck. "I want to... take you... on a date," Billy said in between kisses.

Steve frowned, "We can't really go out, can we? Not the kind of date you'd take a girl on."

"We could go to the cinema. Just two friends going to see a movie – nothing suspicious about that." There was this sincere hopefulness in Billy's eyes and so Steve found himself nodding and snaking his hand up his neck again.

The very next Friday, they were sitting at the local movie theatre, getting comfortable in the very last row of seats. They picked a midnight showing of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* which may not have been the best of ideas since the room was filled to the brim with scared girls wrapped in the arms of their boyfriends, who really only chose the film so they could get laid later.

Billy still managed to sneak his hand into Steve's, interlacing their

fingers tightly without being noticed. Steve smiled, saw Billy smile back in his peripheral vision. And the world be damned, this was the best date he could have imagined.

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The first time they slept together, Steve was fucking nervous because this whole situation was much, much different from the sex he was used to. Suddenly, he understood all the fuss girls made about giving it up – this was fucking terrifying. And he wasn't really given time to think about it. It just kind of happened in the heat of the moment - one second he was pressed up against the door, kissing, kissing, kissing and the next he was pulling off his shirt while walking backwards to the bed.

Billy's eyes burned a flaming path on Steve's bare skin as they wandered over his body and he felt so damn self-conscious.

And then Billy leaned over and planted butterfly kisses on his collar bone and then down, down, down and, in that moment, Steve knew he was doomed.

And so it happened. Slowly and steadily and with way more gentleness than Steve thought Billy was capable of.

After the deed was done they stayed there, lying in Steve's bed, sharing a cigarette, filling the room with smoke.

"What are we?" Steve asked because he had never asked before and he felt like asking in that very moment, so he did.

"Whatever you want," answered Billy ('everything' was what he really wanted to say but he didn't because it may have been too much and he didn't want to scare Steve away).

"Boyfriend I guess," mumbled Steve because whatever it was they had, he didn't want to be just a fuck buddy.

"Yeah, could be," said Billy, taking the cigarette from Steve and pulling a long, long drag to cover the smile that was forming on his lips.

The first time they fought was because Steve fucked up.

He was sitting on a couch at a party he didn't really want to be at. Billy promised he'd come but he kind of didn't. Technically, he was only late. Very, very late. Steve was already on his third beer and the clock was about to hit ten. The party had started around seven. Maybe eight. He wasn't sure about anything anymore.

He chugged the remainder of his beer and stood up on slightly wobbly legs to go get a refill.

After beer number six he was barely aware of what was happening around him. His consciousness was entirely overshadowed by the amount of alcohol flowing through his bloodstream. He took note of the girl he had never seen before sitting on his lap. And he was kind of aware of a faraway sensation of lips kissing his neck.

After he finished the seventh cup and Billy was still nowhere to be seen. And so he decided that he was mad at him (he should be mad right? He ditched him, was that something to be mad about? Yeah, yeah it was. Or wasn't it? His brain wasn't functioning properly.). And there was this girl still sitting on his lap (was it even the same one? He didn't know, they all seemed kind of the same to him) and so he kissed her, or maybe she kissed him - it didn't matter, the outcome was the same. There was a voice at the back of his head telling him to stop. Stop, stop, stop. But there was a beer in his hand a girl on his lap and so he didn't listen.

And then he opened his eyes and saw a smudge of blond hair and an unbuttoned shirt and an angry, hurt face. Steve sobered up at the sight of Billy, most of the alcohol simmered out as his throat closed up. His mind was suddenly filled up with a constant loop of 'fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck' as he pushed the girl off and half stormed, half stumbled out of the front door, yelling Billy's name, begging him to stop, to wait, to let him explain.

Billy turned around sharply as Steve caught up with him. "What!?" he barked.

"Hey," Steve slurred out, stumbling back at the ferocity of Billy's voice, "you didn't come. I waited. There was beer. Uh, I think there's still some left, uh, if you want some." Steve stood there, swaying slightly, with his thumb pointing back to the house. He thought that maybe if he didn't mention the incident Billy wouldn't either. He was wrong.

"Who was that bitch, Steve?" Billy asked.

"Which one?"

"The one that had her goddamn tongue down your throat just until now!"

"Uh, I don't know. I, uh..."

And then Billy's patience snapped. He pushed Steve hard enough to send him flying. He fell with a sickening sound of a body hitting concrete. Billy knelt down next to the dazed boy, seizing him by the front of his shirt, "We are done Harrington. Done, do you hear me?"

Steve tried to get out an apology, a plea, anything really, but he just lied there, dazed, gasping for air, as he watched Billy walk away.

Waking up the next day was punishment in itself. School was even worse. Billy didn't come. He didn't show up the next day either. Or the next one. Or the day after that. And then, when he finally did, his exposed chest was littered with so many bruises it was hard to see a patch of unmarked skin. He walked with his head held high, wearing them like batches of honor. Steve wondered if they were from his father or some random guy who he had provoked into a fight.

Billy pretended Steve didn't exist and Steve knew that it was well deserved. In fact, he deserved so much worse.

That night he stayed up thinking, just like he had done every single night since Billy cut him out. He could have just let it go. He could have come to terms with it. He could have accustomed to life without Billy. But he didn't want to. Maybe he had no right to want anything but, whatever the case, he was not giving up on the boy. He was not.

And so the next day after school he found himself in front of Billy's house. He pressed his thumb against the doorbell with his best shit-eating smile plastered on his face. Billy's father opened the door and gave him an agonizingly slow once-over. Steve wanted to do things to him until there was nothing but a heap of fresh meat left on the front porch, but that wouldn't make the best first impressions, would it?

"What do you want, boy?"

"I came to see Billy. We were supposed to study together." (Steve could have thought of something more creative but the asshole didn't seem worthwhile so why even bother?) The older man raised a skeptical eyebrow but stepped out of the way to let Steve in anyway. "Here," he said, pushing open one of the nondescript doors that were lining the hallway.

Billy looked up slowly. He didn't seem to be startled by the unwelcome visitors. His eyes remained blank as they moved from his father to Steve.

"Have fun," Mr. Hargrove almost sneered before slamming the door closed.

Billy kept his gaze fixed on Steve, face expressionless, eyes empty. Maybe he should have been angry (he tried and he could still feel the aftermath of the blows) or sad (he did that too, chased his feeling away with a bottle of Jack) or something, anything. But, for now, he only felt an overwhelming sense of emptiness. The kind of emptiness that left him hollowed out, left him feeling as if there wasn't enough oxygen in his lungs, as if there wasn't enough blood flowing through his veins, as if his heart was just barely dragging itself along. Maybe it was the calm before the storm but what did he know about that? For him it was always the storm, the calm utterly forgotten.

He missed the time when Steve wasn't always lurking somewhere in the back of his mind. Hell, he missed the time when he didn't have to push him to the back of his mind because he barely ever made an appearance in his thoughts. And at the same time, he knew he didn't really want any of that because Steve was the best thing that has ever happened to him, or at least had been up until the moment he had pushed his tongue down the whore's mouth and everything he

thought he had withered, died, turned into dust, nothingness. Fuck, did he miss the time when he was just a conceited asshole who cared about nothing, not even himself.

And truth be told, he really wanted to take Steve back. His entire being ached to reach out and pull him in. But how could he? He was in enough pain, hurt often enough, and it would only take one more string inside him to snap for him to snap along with it, shatter, cease to exist.

And so Billy just continued to look at Steve as he pleaded and pleaded and pleaded. "Punch me if you want to, just please..." Steve whispered and out of sudden Billy's fists ached to make contact with that smooth, unmarked skin on Steve's jaw and so he swung, again and again and again, and Steve let him, barely even flinching.

Tears flowed down Billy's cheeks as his knuckles cracked. It didn't feel good, it didn't feel satisfying – it only hollowed him out more and more. But he kept punching until the flame that was fueling him went out, extinguished by worry and sadness and despair. He let his forehead fall against Steve's chest, tears soaking through the bloodied fabric.

"Why would you ever do something like that?"

"I don't know. I don't know," Steve mumbled into Billy's hair.

They lied there, sobbing silently, chests heaving, Steve holding Billy close, promising the world to him, whispering sweet nothings. And so Billy gave in. Maybe he had learned to relish the pain.

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The first time Steve told Billy he loved him was way different from what he had imagined it being like. They were sitting on the railing of one of the many balconies Steve's house seemed to have, their legs dangling dangerously over the edge. Steve found his eyes lingering on the side of Billy's face, watching the other boy bring a cigarette to his lips, marveling over the way light was reflecting on his skin, tingeing it with blue and green and red and making it so damn beautiful. His chest tightened when Billy turned his head to look at

him. His lips were curled in a bemused smile. Steve was one of the very few people who were allowed the honor of seeing Billy's real smile – not the cruel, angry thing he wore as a defense mechanism, but the small movement of lips, barely noticeable as he bowed down his head a little to hide his eyes that were glistening with something raw and genuine.

Steve reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind Billy's ear. "I love you," he whispered because it felt right to say it then and there, quietly in the utter serenity only true midnight could carry, for no one but Billy to hear.

Billy's back stiffened. He looked down at his hands, calloused and scarred and all kinds of fucked up and then he moved his gaze to Steve's, whose were just as bad. And so he looked up, dropped the cigarette and pulled Steve, who was still holding his breath, into a kiss.

He didn't say it back when their lips parted, or when they swung their legs over the cold metal and climbed off, or when he was backing Steve toward the bed, or when he was taking off his shirt. He said it when they were lying in the comfortable silence, in the space between when their bodies were calming down from the whole new high and dawn, when everything sounded twice as loud and true. He closed his eyes and pressed his lips against Steve's shoulder. "I love you, too. You know that, right?"

Steve inhaled sharply, exhaled slowly. He let his eyelids drop, let the moment be engraved into his memory forever.

"Yeah, I know."

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The first time Steve saw Billy truly, irreparably and absolutely broken was the night he walked onto his backyard just to see a figure sitting on the edge of the pool. Steve didn't need to look any closer to know who the body belonged to. He was so well acquainted with it – its shape, the way it moved, the way it made his very own body respond – he'd have been able to recognize it in the deepest of nights. After all, he had spent the darkest of hours with his hands memorizing

every curve of it – every dip and scar and imperfection were forever imbedded in his muscle memory.

He did not know why Billy didn't ring the doorbell, or call (or just walk in, for God's sake, it's not like he'd never done it before). But Billy was just sitting there, at the edge of the pool, with his feet dipped just below the surface, rippling the otherwise calm water. His whole posture was somehow... wrong. His back was hunched over, as if he was slowly falling into himself. He gave out an impression of a withering rose, finally crumbling under the weight of the world.

Steve sat down next to him, kicked off his shoes and let his feet sink into the freezing water in an echo of Billy's own. Billy's blank face was faintly illuminated by the light reflected off of the waves, dancing over his skin like a blue flame, licking at the edges, morphing it into something entirely new.

"I wanted to call you," Billy whispered under his breath, "I just didn't know what I'd say."

"Billy..." Steve started. He wasn't sure what to say either. He wasn't used to seeing Billy like this – absolutely void of emotion.

"Do you know what it's like to want to die?" Billy asked abruptly, as if the question had been on the tip of his tongue for a long time, just waiting to be let out. And in all honesty, Steve didn't. No matter how sad, angry or depressed he was, he had never wished for death. It just felt way too final and Steve was a person brimming with hope.

"Billy..." Steve tried again, this time with far more desperation marking his voice.

Billy bowed his head even deeper until his chin was almost touching his neck. "You have no idea how he makes me feel. Worthless, redundant, as if I'm just there to breathe his air." Billy ran his fingers through his already disheveled hair. His hands were trembling so badly Steve wanted to reach out and take them into his, hold onto them, keep them steady. But before he could, Billy reached down and gripped the edge of his shirt, he looked up for a moment to make brief eye contact with Steve, as if he was ensuring himself that he was there and watching. Then he pulled it up and Steve's heart

stopped for a moment, broke, started again. There, on Billy's otherwise flawless chest, a large circle was carved out. With a knife and a drunkard's hand, Steve guessed from the uneven line. The wound was already scabbed over and healing slowly. Steve wasn't naïve enough to think the scar the blade had left below the surface would ever heal. He mourned Billy's soul, for he knew that, after this, it was gone for good – left in shreds too small to stitch back together.

"A zero. How fitting, isn't it?" Billy scoffed, the words tasting like poison in his mouth. His voice was shaking, occasionally broken by a suppressed sob.

"Your father..." Steve breathed out, unable to take his eyes off of the once smooth skin that he had run his hands over mere days ago.

"He told me things about my mother. Horrible things, Steve. He told me I was an accident. That he never wanted me. That no one would ever want me. Why would anyone want a fuck up like me anyway? Fuck," he buried his face into his hands, forceful sobs shaking his body violently. "I'm a zero. Nothing. And everyone should know."

Steve reached over and pulled Billy to him – so close he didn't know where his body ended and the other began. He didn't tell him everything was going to be okay. He didn't tell him that his father didn't mean what he said. He didn't tell him that one day he would look back and laugh at the ridiculousness of the entire situation. Steve wasn't a liar. But Steve did press his mouth into Billy's golden hair and whispered 'I love you, I love you, I love you,' over and over and over again until he felt like a broken record.

"I want to leave. I want to go back to California. I could find a place to stay. I could find a job, a decent apartment. I don't want to live like this Steve. I can't do this anymore."

Steve shook his head. In that moment, he may have been selfish and he may have been a horrible human being but he couldn't let Billy go. Not now, after everything. "Stay with me. Just three more months until graduation. Then we are free to go."

"Where will we go?"

"Anywhere you want," Steve promised.

He could feel Billy's lips twitch against his collar bone. "That sounds nice."

"Yeah. Yeah, it does."

And so, the next day, Steve helped Billy carry his things into the trunk of the Camaro. He cleaned out a drawer for Billy to put his clothes into. He pinned up Billy's posters above his bed. He made room for Billy's hairspray on his bathroom shelf.

Just three more months. Then they would go wherever Billy's heart desired. Steve would make sure of that because he promised and Billy deserved better than empty words and broken promises.

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The first time Billy met Steve's parents was a few weeks after Billy semi-moved into Steve's house. Steve was leaning against the fridge, sipping a beer. Billy was sitting on the counter with one of his legs pulled up, resting his chin on his knee. He was wearing a shirt buttoned all the way up to his neck. Steve was rambling about college again and Billy pretended to listen when the sound of a key being turned in the lock brought Steve to silence.

For a heartbeat, he stayed absolutely still and then he almost stumbled over his own feet as he rushed out of the room. He stopped short when he came face to face with his parents who were standing in the hallway, their suitcases lying by their feet.

His mother threw her arms out, all dramatic gestures and broad smiles, and sang horribly out of tune, "Home sweet home!" When she spotted Steve she grinned even wider. "Aren't you going to welcome your beloved mother with a hug?"

Steve shook his head. "I haven't seen you in two month. You didn't even care enough to call. For fuck's sake, you were supposed to be gone for... how did you put it? Oh yeah – just a fortnight, darling." Steve scoffed in a mockingly high voice with a really bad fake British accent that was worryingly close to how his mom actually sounded.

"A little bit of respect would be due, Steve," his father scolded, trying too hard to make his face transform into a stern look which his muscles didn't seem to be capable of. His father was a man of martinis and small talk, not a respected parental figure.

"Honey," his mother touched her husband's arm softly, "don't be like that." Then she turned her attention back to Steve. "We had... matters to attend to," she giggled, looking at her husband mischievously, making him, in turn, chuckle lowly.

"Sure you did." Steve snorted, crossing his arms over his chest. This was one of the very few things that were stable in his life – the sun would rise in the morning and his parents were snobbish assholes who cared about nothing but money and their respectable reputations.

Steve could exactly pinpoint the moment Billy walked into the room. He could see the way his mother's demeanor changed, how her spine straightened and how she squeezed her arms a little closer together to make her cleavage seem larger. Her eyes twinkled as if she was a starving lioness about to take a bite of her prey while his father stood there, completely oblivious.

"And who is your friend?" she purred, giving him one of her famously dazzling smiles.

Billy swallowed thickly and tried to back away a little without looking too obvious.

"That's Billy," Steve said dryly. His parents were not worthy of any more of an explanation and he was not obliged to give one. "He's been hanging around here a lot lately. You'd know if you were ever here."

"Steve," his mother sighed in exasperation, "don't make a scene in front of our guest."

Steve wanted to laugh at her word choice – their guest. He almost felt bad when Billy gave him a wide-eyed look that practically screamed 'please keep her the hell away from me' but it was just all way too funny.

"Well, we were just leaving anyway. Weren't we, Billy?"

Billy scratched the back of his neck nervously, "Uh, yeah. It was nice meeting you Mr. and Mrs. Harrington."

Before his parents had a chance to respond, Steve grabbed two random pairs of shoes and pulled Billy out of the front door and into the Camaro.

"Fuck that was weird," Billy said, fumbling with the jacked he had grabbed from the backseat, looking for a cigarette.

"Hawkins mothers seem to enjoy your company," Steve wiggled his eyebrows. "Hungry for young flesh, those old cougars. Can be appeased by nothing but a good big bite of Hargrove meat." Steve should have been angry. He was always angry when his parents came home with some ridiculous excuse that wasn't even an excuse at all. But this time the whole situation seemed just too damn hilarious. Maybe he realized that, in comparison to Billy's father, his parents were just a couple of shallow idiots that held no power over him.

Billy threw his head back and groaned. Steve exploded into hysterical laughter. Tears streamed down his cheeks as Billy glared at him. But, after a while, Billy gave in too. And so they sat there, laughing and laughing and laughing until they couldn't laugh any more.

"Your parents are... something," Billy said, still a little breathless.

"Tell me about it," Steve grumbled.

"Everything considered, you turned out pretty okay, I suppose," Billy smiled, nudging Steve with his elbow.

Steve smiled back, "You didn't turn out that bad yourself. Everything considered."

Billy's face clouded over, as if a storm was coming after a sunny day. "Don't lie to me, Steve."

Steve shook his head. "I'm not."

That night, they (with some difficulty) sneaked back in through the

window. Steve really didn't desire another uncomfortable conversation with his parents and Billy seemed ready to bolt if he had to survive another encounter with Steve's mom. Or any other Hawkins mom for that matter.

They both anxiously counted down days until graduation.

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The first time Steve truly wished the time could stop was on their prom night. Not that they actually went to prom. They were once again sitting in the very last row of seats at the local movie theatre. Neither of them had any idea what the movie was even called, not that they cared all that much.

There was a middle aged man sitting somewhere in the front and a couple of kids scattered all over the place, but other than that, the auditorium was empty. Billy marveled over the way dust particles danced in the light over his head. If he wanted to he could reach up and let his hand cut off the motion picture. He didn't, but he liked having the option – it made him feel somehow powerful.

Steve leaned over, his breath hot on Billy's neck, "You could have been the Prom King."

The corners of Billy's mouth twitched a little, "Oh, I don't think so, King Steve."

"I would have shared my crown," whispered Steve.

It was Billy's idea not to go, not that it took lot of persuading for Steve to budge. Who were they to be forced to spend the night that was supposed to be the most magical memory of their whole miserable existences in a room full of sweating bodies and judgmental glares.

In that moment, there could have been nothing more magical than the peacefulness of the almost empty movie theatre, the low murmur of actors living the lives of nonexistent people in the background, the quiet rustle of their suits (that they wore even though they had no reason to) as they kissed in the superficial darkness, a beautiful

lightness in their chests that only came with absolute and complete resignation and carelessness.

They decided to walk home afterwards, just enjoying the seemingly ethereal calmness of the streets. They didn't talk – there was no need for words. Step by step, they found themselves standing in front of Steve's house.

Neither of them felt like going inside and calling it a night just yet, so they climbed the fence and lied down onto the wet grass. And as they gazed up at the stars Steve was overcome by a sense of absolute insignificance.

"What is the greatest thing you've ever done?" he asked Billy.

Billy pondered the question for a long while. Then he shook his head. "I don't know. Nothing, I guess."

"Exactly," Steve said. "Neither have I. What is the point of living when there's nothing left of you once you are gone?"

Billy shrugged, "You and I, we were not destined for greatness."

Steve knew, deep down, that Billy was right. He knew, had always known, that his two minutes of fame would end the moment high school was over and then he would find a mediocre job, marry a mediocre girl, live a mediocre life. But with Billy came the almost insufferable hope that maybe, just maybe, there could be something bigger in stock for him after all.

The stars began to fade as the dawn brought in the new day. For an instance, the horizon was blooming with pinks and reds and oranges and the whole world looked almost perfect. Steve wanted to pause the time. He wanted to live in that moment between night and day forever. He wanted to listen to the symphony of Billy's heartbeat in the perfect silence of the sleeping city. He wanted to lie on the grass and feel the hard ground under his back. But then the sun rose and all the magic vanished along with the stars.

"Where do you want to go?" Steve broke yet another of their comfortable silences.

"Europe," Billy said. "I've always wanted to see the Eiffel Tower."

Steve couldn't really tell if Billy was joking or not. "Then Europe it is."

Billy shook his head and laughed without a trace of humor in the sound. "Why are you asking such stupid questions, Steve? You know damn well that I'll follow you wherever you go."

Steve didn't say anything. He just propped himself onto his elbows and leaned down to press his lips against Billy's.

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The last time Steve and Billy saw the town as their home was the day they put Steve's room into a couple of cardboard boxes. Out of sudden the walls were bare and the bed was sheetless and the shelves were empty. It looked like a furniture store display – perfect but utterly unlived in, as if there weren't memories made on every single inch of the linoleum, as if their backs hadn't been pressed against the wall as they kissed countless of times, as if the bed hadn't been the venue of drowsy pillow talks almost every single night for the past few months. The room felt somewhat foreign, alienated by the lack of Steve in it. His whole life had been packed away and now the room he used to call his was just another empty space in the already soulless house.

They walked down the stairs, and out of the front door, and to Billy's car. It still didn't seem real. All this time they had been waiting for this day and now that it was here, Steve couldn't quite grasp the concept of finally leaving Hawkins. His mind refused to wrap itself around the fact that there would be no more high school or basketball games, that his locker wasn't his anymore and that his room was just a place where he'd stay when he came to visit but would never feel truly his ever again. Steve felt like he was running on autopilot, as if it was just a dream and he'd wake up any minute now.

He was gazing out of the window, so absent-minded that he didn't even realize that Billy was talking. Everything seemed like a background noise to him, like a constant buzzing of the real world

somewhere at the back of his mind.

"You are supposed to be excited, Steve," Billy's voice finally got through to him. Steve turned his head to look at Billy who had his eyes intently focused on the road. Steve knew that Billy didn't like showing weakness but sometimes the raw emotion seeped through his defenses and into his eyes, into the lines on his forehead, into the curve of his mouth. This time Billy seemed almost disappointed, desperate, confused, sad. "You know, we didn't have to make plans if you didn't want to. I could have figured something out on my own. I could have gone to California like I wanted."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Steve frowned. Billy had his full attention now.

"Just look at yourself, Steve. You look like a lost puppy." Billy was keeping up the façade of utter calm but Steve could see how his knuckles were turning white from the way he was gripping the wheel.

"I..." Steve sighed, closing his eyes and leaning his head back into the headrest. "This just feels so unreal. The whole thing."

"Yeah, right." Billy was silent for a moment. Then he swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing in the kind of way that meant trouble. "The thing is I have never doubted this thing we have. I have never thought that there was something better out there for me. Fuck, Steve, you can't even imagine how much I love you. It's unhealthy, it's eating up my whole being. And I'm fucking okay with it. I chose to let you in and I don't regret a second of it. But I know for a fact that there's something more for you out there, something greater. I know for a fact that there's a girl made just of you, someone you won't have to hide, someone you'll be able to walk hand in hand and tell everyone that she's your girl, someone you won't have to be ashamed of. I know for a fact that you are smart enough to do whatever you want even if you don't think you are and you should never let anyone tell you otherwise. And even though I could be selfish and make you stay with me, I won't because I love you way too much to do that. So I'm asking you right now and I want you to answer with absolute honesty because I won't ask again – do really want to do this, Steve? Do you want to be stuck with me? Do you

want to carry this boulder of having to deal with my shit? Or do you want to leave now and never look back. I won't blame you if you do. I just want you to be happy for fuck's sake. So please, Steve, don't feel obliged to stay. I can take care of myself, I don't need a babysitter."

Billy kept his eyes straight in front of him as if he was too scared to look at Steve, as if he was scared to look over and see relief in Steve's eyes, as if he was scared that Steve would tell him to pull over and let him out, because that was exactly what he feared. He had been thinking about giving Steve the option of leaving for a long time now. He knew that Steve was too good of a person to just stand up and go. And he knew that Steve must have been fed up with his bullshit – who wouldn't be? He was too damn aware of how difficult he was, of how much of a mess he was, of how hard he was making it for Steve. And he meant what he had said. He loved him too much to make him stay and suffer (even though it was such a goddamn cliché and he didn't really want to let Steve go).

Steve stared at him, absolutely dumbfounded, for a long moment. He did not want to leave. He had never even considered leaving a possibility. How could he? Billy had become one of the most important people in his life. His entire existence was orbiting around Billy, he was the center of Steve's universe. He'd kill for the boy for God's sake. And he was not ashamed, had never been ashamed. How Billy could not see that was beyond him.

For a second, he let himself think about getting out of the car and never looking back. He imagined his life without Billy in it. He imagined waking up alone. He imagined going to see a movie with some random college girl. It was ridiculous. It was virtually impossible. It was just not the way Steve imagined his future. Everything he did, everything he planned, everything he wanted to do involved Billy in one way or another. If he left, he would be stuck in a constant cycle of 'what ifs and maybes and regret.

"Pull over," he said and Billy complied. He steered the wheel, eyes blurry and hands shaking. Even though he hated himself with every ounce of his being, he still had hoped in the corner of his heart that was still beating and alive and not completely apathetic, that Steve might not. He had hoped the other boy saw some good in him. He had hoped Steve wasn't just staying out of pity and necessity. Having

his bubble popped felt like waking up into a nightmare.

Steve turned in his seat and reached out to grab Billy's chin. He reluctantly met Steve's eyes. They were unreadable. Billy didn't let the tears fall even though Steve wasn't making it easy for him in any way.

Steve pulled Billy closer until their lips were only a breath away from touching and God did he want them to touch (not now though, there would be enough time for that later). Steve never let Billy look away as he spoke, loudly and clearly, pronunciation every word with care. "I love you. Do you hear me? I love you and I'm not leaving unless you tell me to. And even then I'm going to drunk call you at 3am because I'm not going to give up on you. Ever. I know that you have trust issues. I know that you are not used to people genuinely caring about you. I know that you are not used to being loved. I know all of that because I know you. I know the Billy no one else knows and I fucking love him. Okay? And if you think that I'm doing this because you are some charity case to me then you are fucking wrong. I'm a spoiled brat, remember? I don't care about anyone but me."

Billy laughed softly. The sound was laced with relief, relief, relief and a trace of true happiness. Because Steve was still there, and he had his hand on his cheek, and he was staying.

Billy let his head fall into the crook of Steve's neck, one of the places that was the most familiar to him, that he felt the safest in. He listened to the quiet sound of Steve's breathing and thought that no matter what happened, if he could press his mouth to Steve's neck and feel the even pulse against his lips at the end of the day, then everything would be alright.

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The first time Steve really felt at home was when he and Billy moved into a place of their own (well, technically it was a graduation gift from his parents, and even though his pride suffered major injuries, he wasn't stupid enough to turn it down – after all he had almost no money of his own and he justified the apartment as an apology for the years of neglect, or at least that's what he kept telling himself). It was one of the nicer ones in Philadelphia and must have cost a

fortune.

They moved in and even though Steve wanted to take Billy to Europe like he promised, Billy insisted on staying and getting a job. It wasn't like Billy couldn't get to university (because he could - he actually had a pretty solid brain under that thick skin of his). He just didn't want to.

When Steve asked, Billy would always shrug and give some vague answer, always along the lines of 'not needing a fancy piece of paper to validate his worth.' But Steve suspected there was more to it than Billy was letting on.

And Billy knew Steve didn't buy his excuses. Because that's what they were – transparent excuses that he himself wouldn't believe. But Steve wouldn't question him any further unless he saw that he was willing to be questioned (that was the beauty of being with Steve – he didn't stick his nose where it wasn't welcome). The thing was that Billy didn't want Steve to pay for his education, and he'd rather bath himself in acid than go beg his father for money. Steve was doing way more for Billy than he could ever ask for as it was, and he knew very well that it was a debt he'd never be able to pay off (not that Steve would ever rub it into his face but it was an ever-present boulder he'd have to learn to live with). And so he promised himself that he'd find a job and pay the bills and he'd fucking pull his weight.

Billy got a job as an auto mechanic. He'd work 12-hour shifts at a time, and he'd come home beyond exhausted, and he'd smell like petrol for days afterwards, no matter how much he showered or how hard he scrubbed his skin. But the job paid well and so he endured each day with his chin held high and without complaint.

Steve got an afternoon job as a barista at a fairly cozy café across the street. Not that he knew anything about coffee or the basics of making it, but he was a quick learner and in no time he had a number of regulars who would come round for a cup and a casual chat every time he was working. In the evenings, when the rush calmed down a little, he'd sit on the counter and read a book, or study, or just watch the street in hopes of spotting a familiar mane of blond curls walking down the sidewalk. Not that it was a frequent occurrence that Billy would get home before Steve.

The first time Billy came home drunk, Steve got really, really scared. Not because Billy was an aggressive drunk (because he wasn't – he was more of a stumbling, stuttering mess of flailing limbs and absent gazes). No, he was scared of what alcohol could forge out of Billy. A burnout. A lost case. Steve was aware of the direction Billy had been headed in even before he met him. He knew how people like Billy were destined to end up – drowning themselves in a bottle because they were too far gone to be saved. Steve didn't want to see Billy fall down the hole of alcohol and drugs and numbing himself enough to make life sufferable.

The next morning Billy apologized profusely and Steve held him close as he promised it wouldn't happen again.

And Billy did keep the promise, just not in the way Steve imagined. Billy started coming home with bruises and bloody knuckles and black eyes. Steve would have said something, had Billy not looked so fucking happy and Steve understood, for he himself used to punch his pain away not that long ago.

And then one day Billy stepped into the ring with his knuckles bared and a manic smile that faded into a look of confusion and surprise the moment his eyes met those of his opponent.

Steve winked at him from the other side of the ring, his mouth forming a sly curve that could have been perceived as taunting, though Billy knew that it was merely the smugness of Steve's actions reflected on his perfect fucking face.

"Ready Hargrove?" Steve asked, rolling his neck and cracking his knuckles.

"You bet, Harrington," Billy grinned and without warning threw the first punch.

And Steve dodged.

What they had was not perfect. It was not the teenage dream

everyone fantasized about. Billy was still broken and Steve was still desperately trying to fix him. Steve still had daddy (and mommy) issues and he still had to take money from his parents just to get by. Billy still enjoyed the bitterness of alcohol on his tongue and the exhilarating pain of forming bruises.

So yes – they were by no means perfect. Quite the contrary, actually. But they would have it no other way.